Considered to be amongst the most successful regional organisations, the EU and ASEAN have emerged to highly influence today’s world affairs. This has brought both organisations to build on a strategic partnership based on common interests and further promote an international, rules-based order.

This event brought together a panel of Ambassadors both from the ASEAN and the EU to discuss more thoroughly their political and economic relations, as well as the steps towards advancing innovation and sustainability in both regions and beyond.
Welcome remarks by

_H.E. Mr Alexander Spachis, Member of the Advisory Board of the European Institute for Asian Studies_

After welcoming the guests, H.E. Mr Alexander Spachis opened his speech by recognising the significance of the growing relations between ASEAN and the EU – an unusual yet equally interesting subject that remains pertinent in discussions of current world affairs. Acknowledging their respective milestones, the EU and ASEAN are considered to be among the most effective models of regional organisations. Consequently, the two regions have emerged to become pivotal economic partners.

In the area of trade where this partnership has flourished, the EU has played a vital role as ASEAN’s biggest investor and second largest trading partner, amongst other things. This has opened doors for negotiations on a free trade agreement between the EU and a number of ASEAN countries, with the hopes of moving towards an ambitious region-to-region trade and investment framework. Apart from trade, the EU continues to be the largest donor in the ASEAN region. As an important player in helping the organisation reduce poverty and increase opportunities, the EU has fully supported regional integration and connectivity, as well as bilateral assistance which would assist ASEAN member states in realising their goals.

Mr Spachis then introduced the high-ranking panel of discussants composed of the Ambassadors of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore, as well as the Head of the Division for Southeast Asia and ASEAN of the European External Action Service. He also honoured the presence of the Ambassadors of the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar and Cambodia in the event.

Introduction by

_H.E. Dato Hasnudin Hamzah, Ambassador of Malaysia to the European Union_

H.E. Dato Hasnudin Hamzah first expressed his gratitude for the presence of such a large audience, which he identified as a symbol of the strong interest in support of the ASEAN-EU relations. Ambassador Hamzah mentioned how the EU and ASEAN as partners share several commonalities, especially in promoting global peace, stability and prosperity. Accordingly, this common objective has become the most significant driver in advancing and sustaining the partnership for the benefit of the two regions and beyond.

Since the establishment of relations over forty years ago, the partnership between the EU and ASEAN has undeniably made progress. The EU continues to be a major development partner of ASEAN, having provided around 200 million euros in assistance of ASEAN’s
regional integration projects. Ambassador Hamzah also restated the importance of the EU’s role as ASEAN’s biggest donor, second biggest trading partner and the biggest provider of foreign direct investments. Due to these reasons amongst others, he believes that the ASEAN-EU relations will continue to prosper for years to come.

Focusing more closely at ASEAN as a regional organisation, Ambassador Hamzah stated that ASEAN has strived against all odds to get to where it is today – an organisation which has “...transformed from a region driven by conflict and instability into one of the most stable, peaceful and competitive economies in the world”. It is the sixth largest economy in the world and is one of the world’s preferred investment destinations. With years of commitment to maintaining a strong bond within its member states, ASEAN remains a key player in preserving stability in the region. This has fostered community building and integration and has helped realise the organisation’s goals and aspirations.

Through this, the partnership of the EU and ASEAN has grown predominantly from a trade perspective. Sharing views on the importance of a non-discriminatory, rules-based and transparent trading system, the two regions collectively account for over thirty per cent of global GDP. Ambassador Hamzah reaffirmed that further intensified collaboration between the two regions will result in a stronger and more influential position in the global economy.

Despite this, Ambassador Hamzah pointed out that the EU and ASEAN still have opposing views on certain issues, such as palm oil production. Sharing the concern for biodiversity and sustainable development, Malaysia, together with other palm oil producing countries, has adhered to initiatives aimed at reaching common ground for palm oil. For Malaysia, this means introducing new certifications on its palm oil exports to the EU. Moreover, within ASEAN, the establishment of the Heart of Borneo agreement has introduced a method of strengthening resilience to climate change. Ambassador Hamzah then reiterated that the Malaysian government is ensuring that a balance be maintained between environmental conservation and socio-economic growth.

Nonetheless, Ambassador Hamzah stated that the differences between the EU and ASEAN must not discourage the common objective of both regions in further deepening their relations. ASEAN is ready to work closely with the EU through being more proactive in its engagements. Ambassador Hamzah concluded his speech by expressing his hope for a greater understanding of ASEAN-EU relations, a process that will lead to a stronger, more mutually beneficial partnership. Together, ASEAN and the EU will help shape the global agenda towards a better future.
Panel discussion by

**H.E. Mr Manasvi Srisodapol, Ambassador of Thailand to the European Union**

Following Ambassador Hamzah’s comprehensive introduction, H.E. Mr Manasvi Srisodapol opened the discussion by reiterating Thailand’s commitment to ASEAN. Despite being in a state of transition as both a democracy and monarchy, the role Thailand plays within the regional organisation has never faltered. Ambassador Srisodapol identified that the reason for this is the consistent unity among the member states, arguing that without this, ASEAN would easily be torn apart by competing powers.

While unity is an important factor in ensuring a stronger organisation, centrality has become another core aspect that represents ASEAN. Ambassador Srisodapol discussed that the organisation has engaged with major players in a constructive manner through several types of platforms such as the ASEAN+3 and the East Asian Summit. Through these platforms, he acknowledged that there has been a sense of peace and stability in the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, these have helped shaped the growing influence of ASEAN in the world.

For Thailand’s chairmanship of ASEAN this year, the focus has been on sustainability. Following the guidance that the King Rama IX of Thailand imparted on the Thai people, the country has focused on addressing issues of sustainable development through a “sufficiency economy” outlook. Through this philosophy, Thailand has been at the forefront of confronting challenges that have been present over the past years. Although this has not been easy, the country has been successful at overcoming several issues, such as that of undocumented migrant workers. This new philosophy has functioned to change the way in which Thailand tackles its problems.

In this regard, Thailand has been more committed to developing stronger relationships with other regional organisations, particularly the EU. In the area of connectivity, Thailand has cooperated with the EU in the field of air safety, having collaboratively devised a stronger air safety regime. In a similar way, the issue of illegal fishing was improved thanks to better dialogue with the EU. This has allowed for more accountability in the fishing industry, leading to benefits not only for Thailand, but also its neighbouring ASEAN countries which are deeply affected by unsustainable fishing measures. As these issues relate to sustainability, Ambassador Srisodapol underlined the significance of working together on solutions that are mutually beneficial. He further mentioned that there are other areas in which ASEAN and the EU can proactively participate in, such as information technology, artificial intelligence and e-commerce, among others.
In the 53 years since its formation, ASEAN has developed its strength and effectiveness as a regional organisation, all the whilst learning from the challenges and set-backs experienced throughout Europe’s regionalisation process. Indeed, the EU and ASEAN have grown more closely together, becoming de facto strategic partners. Ambassador Srisodapol also highlighted the fact that the two regions have more or less become economically interdependent, especially in the realm of trade. This has pronounced the fact that both regions play a vital role in addressing regional and global peace. Given this broad set of issues on which both the EU and ASEAN have a common outlook, Ambassador Srisodapol believes firmly in working towards a regional comprehensive economic partnership.

**H.E. Mr Jaya Ratnam, Ambassador of Singapore to the European Union**

H.E. Mr Jaya Ratnam reaffirmed the previous speakers’ positions, also emphasising that the EU is one of ASEAN’s longest standing partners. Despite this, Ambassador Ratnam identifies that the two regions are not natural partners and are in fact, very different whether it be in history, principles, or the way in which they are organised. Nevertheless, the EU and ASEAN have always been able to share common interests. This has brought the two regions together to build a closer relationship.

In an attempt to make this more evident, Ambassador Ratnam firstly focused on areas in which the EU and ASEAN are working hard to make their relationship more meaningful. Firstly, the concept of connectivity has been a priority in ASEAN-EU relations. Acknowledging Ambassador Srisodapol’s speech on air safety, Ambassador Ratnam discussed how there are high hopes for the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement, which when concluded will be the first substantive aviation agreement between two regional organisations. This agreement will assist both the EU and ASEAN at setting standards in safety and disciplines, especially in competition, further leading the way for a stronger multilateral framework on aviation.

Secondly, the significance of trade between the EU and ASEAN was yet again highlighted. Ambassador Ratnam discussed that with the EU’s free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam now concluded, hopes for future negotiations with other ASEAN member states are high. These agreements will help move towards an ASEAN-EU free trade agreement which will ultimately send a clear signal of the regions’ commitment to multilateralism, trade liberalisation and economic integration, among others.

In a new area of cooperation, the EU and ASEAN have worked together in addressing climate change. Both regional organisations have committed to the Paris Agreement which has showed a more concrete cooperation in achieving this common goal. This has also helped both the EU and ASEAN at adhering to a rules-based, multilateral order.
Another focus area which is timely in today’s highly globalised world is the concept of digital space. As the organisation’s chair last year, Singapore’s key takeaway was that of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, which aimed at working with twenty-six pilot cities within the ASEAN to create a platform to deal with digital space. This takes into account how to govern it, how to regulate it, and essentially how to promote innovation throughout the organisation. This has also helped strengthen mutually beneficial partnerships with external partners, most notably the EU.

Lastly, Ambassador Ratnam discussed people-to-people relations, which is a source of great potential in collaborating with the EU. This would add a new balance to relationships, recognising the greater participation of citizens in both regions. Ambassador Ratnam highlighted two more specific areas in working with the EU: (1) enhancing youth exchanges, especially between institutes of higher learning in ASEAN and the EU; and (2) building a relationship between the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and the European Parliament, further allowing a stronger institutional relationship between the two parliaments.

Through these areas, Ambassador Ratnam stated that the key to a stronger relationship is reciprocal meaningfulness: “If it is meaningful to both sides, then you have a strong basis to push this relationship forward.”

**H.E. Mr Yuri Octavian Thamrin, Ambassador of Indonesia to the European Union**

Aware that the issues earlier tackled by the previous speakers were very similar to his points, H.E. Mr Yuri Octavian Thamrin emphasised three main areas. The first that area mentioned was the perception of European businessmen towards Southeast Asia - that it is a land of opportunities. Referring to a survey taken in Southeast Asia with 230 CEOs, Ambassador Thamrin pointed out that European businesspeople showed positive sentiments towards ASEAN, proving that ASEAN is a destination for investment. However, the same survey suggested that the organisation should speed up the realisation of a single market. Ambassador Thamrin reaffirmed this, relating it to the creation of a region-to-region free trade agreement, a process which he deemed would deliver greater benefits compared to bilateral agreements.

Another important, albeit controversial, point that Ambassador Thamrin discussed was Islam. As the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia remains supportive of the growing cooperation between the EU and ASEAN. However, in reference to the recent events in New Zealand, Ambassador Thamrin underlined the intolerance of Muslims apparent in the EU, urging both the EU and ASEAN to combat Islamophobia and intolerance.
together. He also stated that Indonesia combines Islam, modernity and democracy, and would further cooperate in dialogues to address this crucial issue.

Lastly, with reference to Ambassador Hamzah’s earlier discussion, Ambassador Thamrin mentioned the issue of palm oil. Palm oil remains one of the most important commodities in Indonesia and the country stands committed to promoting sustainable palm oil. However, Ambassador Thamrin stated that there remains a feeling of discrimination and double standards, especially when compared to other commodities such as soybean. In this regard, Ambassador Thamrin concluded by reiterating the importance of sustainable palm oil in eradicating poverty, particularly in Indonesia, and hoping that there may be a better, more mutually beneficial way out of this.

**H.E. Mr David Daly, Head of Division for Southeast Asia and ASEAN, European External Action Service**

The final speaker was H.E. Mr David Daly, who acknowledged that the points made by the previous panellists are equally essential in strengthening ASEAN-EU relations. Starting with the issue of palm oil, Mr Daly reiterated that the position the EU has taken focuses on reducing the effects of biofuels which have had an adverse impact on climate change. Through the EU’s new directive on palm oil, the goal is not to ban but to gradually lessen production. As palm oil is considered a complex issue especially in light of the differing views of both the EU and ASEAN, Mr Daly suggested that a stronger engagement be put in place, establishing a working group particularly with Malaysia and Indonesia. Through doing this, the issue is most likely to be resolved, a process which will fundamentally help in attaining sustainable development.

Mr Daly then went on to discuss ASEAN-EU relations from a broader perspective, which he asserted have been based on a commitment to an international, rules-based order. The value of working together closely with neighbours has been prominent in both regions, further strengthening regionalism. Nonetheless, Mr Daly stated that there is much more to be done, especially in adhering to the objectives of UN and WTO as well as in securing prosperity across the globe.

Acknowledging that the areas of trade, connectivity, innovation and sustainable development are closely interrelated and equally important, the EU and ASEAN have taken measures in moving towards more concretised solutions. Mr Daly made mention of the different ways that the regional organisations are doing this, including through various dialogues and people-to-people initiatives.

Acknowledging that most of the important issues relating to ASEAN-EU relations were previously mentioned, Mr Daly brought to light a more in-depth discussion of the
involvement of the private sector. This process will draw the two regions a step closer to achieving a strategic partnership as it will lead to a proliferation of exchanges between academics, research and development and the like. Likewise, in security and human rights, the EU and ASEAN have worked on upgrading their relationship. More importantly, because the EU has a particular way of contributing to security and human rights in many parts of the world, its influence in the Southeast Asian region will be pronounced. This, in turn, will result in stronger rules and standards with which dialogues can be shaped.

Mr Daly concluded his speech by acknowledging that the relationship of the EU and ASEAN is genuine in that the two regional organisations are able to discuss even the most difficult issues they face. In hopes of tackling challenges that cut across borders together, Mr Daly hopes that the EU and ASEAN continue their dialogue and make their partnership even stronger than ever before.

Q&A

After a compelling discussion between the panellists, the floor was opened for the participants. Most of the questions that were raised circulated around controversial issues such as palm oil and Islamophobia as well as the prospective obstacles that the organisations are facing towards an official strategic partnership.

On palm oil, the Ambassadors of Malaysia and Indonesia reaffirmed their positions that both countries are committed to sustainable production. They further acknowledged that the dialogue must continue as there remains discrimination in the way the issue is being treated. Nonetheless, Mr Daly reiterated that the EU has tried to base its actions on the best science available and that it is doing its best at improving its methods to benefit both parties.

Questions were also raised about the seemingly quiet role Indonesia is taking on the issue of Islamophobia, despite being one of the four pillars of the religion. Ambassador Thamrin stated that the country has brought together religion, modernity and democracy and this in itself speaks volumes of how it combats the issue at hand. Ambassador of the Philippines, H.E. Mr Eduardo de Vega, took a few minutes as well to agree with Ambassador Thamrin, stating that Indonesia is considered a model for the Muslim community and that there should be a higher level of understanding to effectively address these pressing issues.

On becoming official strategic partners, Mr Daly further suggested that it is the existence of various bilateral issues, such as those previously mentioned, that slow down the process. He stated that both parties must step back on these issues and focus instead on region-to-region areas wherein common interests prevail. There have been evident changes in
the interaction between the EU and ASEAN and it is through this dynamic perspective that this strategic partnership will grow and become resilient for years ahead.

*Report by Pristine Gabrielle Ramos*